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ABSTRACT

Exploratory research was conducted to generate hypotheses regarding behaviors of a 2-year-old subject during social interaction with multi-age partners. The subject of the study was a female child age 2 years and 4 months. Interactions observed were limited to those occurring with a number of partners who were members of the subject's social network. Six children (ranging in age from 5 months to 11 years, 5 months) were observed in various combinations of partnerships with the subject over the course of approximately 1 month. Interactions in a variety of settings were videotaped as they naturally occurred; tapes were transcribed and analyzed according to elements of the ethnographic research cycle described by Spradley (1980). Domain analysis was employed to identify behavioral patterns Emergent categories were further analyzed by means of taxonomies in order to determine more specific relationships between elements of the domains. Behavioral elements were recorded and tallied for each situation. Additionally, the quantity of social interaction and the range of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors exhibited in interaction were examined. Seven hypotheses regarding the subject's social interaction were derived. Results suggest that the 2-year-old child may possess social competence that research has only begun to disclose. It is also suggested that the conclusions may have implications for teacher education, parent education, and early childhood programming. (Author/RH)

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS OF A TWO-YEAR-OLD CHILD

Presentation made at the 1983 ACEI Study Conference in Cleveland

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS OF A TWO-YEAR-OLD CHILD

ABSTRACT

Exploratory research was conducted to generate hypotheses regarding the behaviors of a 2-year-old subject during social interaction with multiaged partners. Characteristics such as freedom from setting, the importance of mixed-age contacts, the range of situationally specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors, and responsiveness to the partner suggest that the 2 year old may possess social competence that research has only begun to disclose.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study was to begin to explore the characteristics of social behavior of a population which has been given scant attention in the existing research literature: 2 year olds. The intent of the research was to lay a foundation for study of 2 year old social behavior with other children. The research also attempted to enlarge the framework of study regarding early social behavior. To that end, a variety of settings and a range of partners of different ages were included. Additionally, a minimum of constraints and manipulations were imposed and a broad range of both verbal and nonverbal data recorded and analyzed.

Given the scarcity of previous research regarding the social behavior of 2 year olds with children of varying ages, discussion of the existing research will follow a

description of the method and emergent hypotheses of the present study. The literature base will then be described in relation to the findings of the present research.

METHODOLOGY

Given the scarcity of existing research in this area, the methodology employed needed to allow the discovery of both questions and answers from within the social situation being studied (Guba, 1978; Spradley, 1980). Such an exploratory study would generate hypotheses rather than predict or control behavior on the basis of existing hypotheses (Duncan & Fiske, 1977). Therefore, naturalistic inquiry, particularly elements of the ethnographic cycle of participant observation, was selected as the appropriate research methodology.

The subject of the study was a 2-year 4-month-old female. The interactions observed were limited to those which occurred with a number of partners who were already members of the subject's social network. Six children, ranging in age from 5 months to 11-years 5-months, were observed in various combinations of partnerships with the subject over the course of approximately a month. Interactions were taped as they naturally occurred without researcher control or manipulations. Portable videotape equipment was used in order to allow the researcher maximum mobility in following the children's interactions. A variety of settings was videotaped, including both the subject's and the partners' homes and indoor, outdoor, mealtime and bathtime locations.

The collected videotapes were transcribed and analyzed using elements of the ethnographic research cycle described by Spradley (1980). Domain analysis was employed to ferret out the patterns found within the videotaped records of the subject's behaviors. The categories that emerged from the domain analyses were further analyzed, by means of taxonomies, in order to determine more specific relationships between the elements of the domains. Using the data produced by the domain and taxonomic analyses, the behavioral elements found were recorded and tallied for each situation. The quantity of social interaction and the range of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors exhibited during such social interaction were examined.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Analysis of the data garnered from the videotapes indicated the emergence of hypothetical patterns regarding the 2-year-old subject's social interaction. These have been condensed in the following summary in order to tie together the main threads of the results of the study.

Hypothesis 1: The 2-year-old subject displays a quantity of social competence that is, for the most part, hitherto unrecognized in the research literature. This competence is characterized by a wide range of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, situationally specific adaptations and responses to the context of the immediate social interaction, responsiveness to the partner and social initiative.

Hypothesis 2: The 2-year-old subject's social interaction behavior displays freedom from the influence of the setting.

Hypothesis 3: The 2-year-old subject's social competence and social skill is more suitable for interaction with single partners than with multiple partners.

Hypothesis 4: The social interaction behaviors of the 2-year-old subject demonstrate that she adapts herself to each partner, behaving on the basis of her perception of their communicative and social competencies and the limitations of the situation.

Hypothesis 5: The 2-year-old subject's social interaction behaviors demonstrate an ability to assess her social status vis-a-vis that of her partner and to act accordingly.

Hypothesis 6: The social interaction behavior of the subject demonstrates that older siblings should not be expected to afford a maximum of social interaction or social interaction behavior with 2-year-old children.

Hypothesis 7: The amount of social interaction and the particular social interaction behaviors vary according to the age of the partner. Proximity with older partners results in maximal amounts of social interaction.

DISCUSSION

Based on the hypotheses generated by this research, conclusions regarding general areas of the 2-year-old subject's social interaction characteristics were drawn.

Social Competence

The study examined social interaction behaviors in ways that included elements with both positive and negative affect and verbal and nonverbal communication channels. The findings tend to be supported by the picture that other recent research has begun to draw. According to these researchers, the child under 2 years of age demonstrates social skill in continually expanding stages and competencies (Eckerman et al., 1975; Mueller & Brenner, 1977; Mueller & Lucas, 1975; Mueller & Vandell, 1979). The 2-year-old subject of this research presented a picture of a child interested in communicating and acting in concert with other children. Proxemic time (that time of physical nearness of the subject with partner) was utilized by the subject to make verbal requests of her partner, to respond to her partner's statements and demands, and to inform her partner with specific descriptions and statements. The subject also modified verbal behaviors with supportive nonverbal channels. Gestures, body movements, paralinguistic qualities such as pitch, stress and intonation, and the use of distance were employed by the subject in meaningful ways in concert with verbalizations. Additionally, the subject maintained an awareness of her partner(s) that enabled entry into, exit from, and reestablishment of interaction. Contextual adaptations to the partner and the situation also occurred during proxemic time and were exemplified both verbally and nonverbally.

Sibling Interaction

Research is particularly lacking in the area involving interaction between siblings. The study conducted by Dunn and Kendrick (1979) suggested that interaction with an older sibling maximized the social behaviors of children under 2. These authors claimed that "the younger sibling could take part in social exchanges with [the older sibling] that reflected a degree of social competence quite different from that shown in the play group observations of age-mates" (p. 155). These researchers suggested that the subjects demonstrated modeling of the older siblings. Additionally, social interaction was less

object-focused and more complex with older siblings than that which occurred with peer partners.

In contrast, in the present research, proximity of the 2-year-old subject with her older sibling appeared to result in interaction that was neither as frequent or complex as the interaction afforded by proximity with other familiar children of various ages. It seems likely that patterns of behavior between sibling are to a great extent unique to each sibling pair. Given the discrepancy between findings, it seems reasonable to suggest the importance of nonsibling members of the 2 year old's social network. Given the possible variation in patterns of relating between sibling pairs, older siblings should not be expected to afford maximal opportunity for the development of social competencies in the 2-year-old younger sibling.

Differential Behaviors in Relation to the Age(s) of Partners

The present research suggested that hypothesis that older partners maximize the interactions of the 2-year-old subject. Except in the case of the older sibling as single partner, both social interaction time and the average length of social interaction episodes increased as the age of the partner increased. This finding is congruent with the research of Goldman and Ross (1978) and Lougee et al. (1977). Both claim the existence of "generally accelerated social activity of younger children in the mixed-age condition" (Lougee et al., 1977, p. 1360).

The hypotheses of the present research also suggested that certain interaction behaviors varied according to the age of the partner. For example, the 2-year-old subject exhibited more partner repetition, less self-repetition, and less social interaction initiation and reinstatement with older partners. Also, the number of gestures and compliances exhibited by the subject increased as the age of the partner increased. Research regarding mixed-age partnerships of young children is scarce. The specific findings of the present research and other research (Langlois et al., 1978; Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975; Lougee et al., 1977) appear to have tapped different facets of social interaction behavior. The three studies conclude, in similar fashion however, that the two types of social experience (same- and mixed-age partnerships) may serve different functions in children's development.

The present research also disclosed social interaction behaviors that are unique to the interactions with the infant and another partner as a pretend baby. Exaggerated intonation, high pitch, close proximity, short message unit length, and a greater number of calls, touching behaviors, and self-repetitions uniquely characterized the 2-year-old subject's interaction behavior with the 5-month-old infant and the role-played baby. Gestures and contextual communications were also exhibited less frequently by the subject during interaction with the infant partner. Such verbal and nonverbal behaviors can be described as adaptations which occurred in accordance with the perceived abilities of the listener. Similar adaptations are described by Shatz and Gelman (1973) and Sachs and Devin (1975) with subjects aged 3-1/2 to 5-1/2. The adaptation of verbal and nonverbal language exhibited by the 2-year-old subject of the present research is similar, then, to that demonstrated in other studies by significantly older children.

Based on the evidence of concurrent findings, the conclusion is reached that mixed-age social experiences (e. g., younger, older, and peer partnerships) may be essential to the advancement of social development. The customary age segregation found in both parent-designed play partnerships and early childhood programs may be deleterious to maximal social development. The utilization of mixed-age groupings seems clearly desirable, both in informal play contacts in the home and in early childhood program planning.

Differential Behaviors in Relation to the Number of Partners

In the present research, differential social interaction behaviors were also evidenced by the 2-year-old subject relative to the number of partners in the situation. When the subject was in proximity with just one partner, there was more social interaction, the social interaction episodes were longer, and the subject exhibited a greater number of verbal behaviors. Additionally, the subject's social interaction initiation and maintenance strategies were more successful in dyads than they were in multiple partner situations. Vandell (1977) similarly found that toddlers (children under 2) spent more time in interaction, exhibited more complex behaviors, and vocalized more in dyadic situations than in group situations. Bronson (1975) reported in her study of peer social behavior during the second year of life that

"the most typical peer encounter involved only two participants" (p. 142). These findings lend support to the conclusion of the present research that the young child's developing social skills are better suited for interaction with one partner at a time. The development of social competence necessitates participation in an ever-widening social network. It would appear, however, that single partnership opportunities must still be provided for the 2 year old in order to maximize both the quality and the quantity of social interaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If future research validates the hypotheses generated by this study, the preceding conclusions have implications that would effect three areas of educational enterprise: teacher education, parent education, and early childhood programming. Because these hypotheses have not yet been subjected to in-depth testing, practice recommendations are speculative in nature and include suggestions for potentially fruitful directions.

It would appear that the social competence of future adults might be enriched if teacher educators carried the emerging research base regarding early social development to the teachers in their training. Both preservice and in-service teachers might benefit from an awareness of the factors that contribute to maximal early social development between children. These factors are those concluded earlier, such as proxemic opportunity, multiaged groupings, and dyadic partnerships. In order to provide further information for the testing of theory against data it would be desirable for teachers to be trained in and encouraged to employ methodologies and skills of observational research. The use of such skills could enable the continued unfolding of new information and insight in the area of social development. The training of teachers in the observing, recording, and analyzing of verbal and nonverbal behaviors of children in their care might potentially meld theory with practice in the field of social development.

The conclusions that result from this study also suggest elements that might be built into parent education programs. It would appear that parents could be helped to understand the potential for social development and competence that their young child possesses and their role in providing the necessary proxemic opportunities. Given the research findings, it is potentially desirable for

parent programs to encourage parents to enable the involvement of their child in a social network that is as broad and varied as possible. In that network, a sibling would be seen as only one of a multitude of partnership opportunities. Parents would be advised, also, to consider the possible benefits of multiaged partnerships and both dyadic and larger group contacts. Additionally, it might also be productive to help parents develop skill in observing and interpreting the social behaviors of their children. In helping parents better understand the interactions they witness, and to identify the factors that hinder or enrich those interactions, it is possible that the development of social competence might be facilitated.

Early childhood programs might constructively examine the whats and whys of their social development components. The potential social abilities of their very young charges should be given both credence and the opportunity to grow. It would be desirable if programs began to experiment with multiaged groupings, dyadic opportunities and the encouragement of the building of large-group social skills. The development and utilization of observational procedures by program personnel might determine the effects of such groupings and enable further insights to emerge. It is on the basis of continual utilization, testing, and modifications of research results that early childhood educators can claim to be doing the best they know how in the area of social development of young children.

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